

Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Rural Youth: A Review of the Literature

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Aspirations of youth have long been of interest to educational researchers and practitioners. In exploring educational or occupational aspirations, researchers generally examine variables such as sex, community size, place of residence, race, socioeconomic status, effect of time (age), determinants of and influences on aspiration development or a combination of these. This literature review focuses on studies which examined the aspirations of rural, non-farm youth in the United States.

When reviewing the literature on adolescents' aspirations, it is striking to note the abundance of research which occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is equally striking to note the paucity of research on this subject in the later 1970s and 1980s. Research in the area generally differentiates between and compares aspirations and expectations. Aspirations are defined as an individual's desire to obtain a status object or goal such as a particular occupation or level of education. Expectations are the individual's estimation of the likelihood of attaining those goals, plans, ambitions or dreams. The conceptualization of these terms is credited to Kuvlesky and Bealer [33] in their attempt to define occupational choice which they consider to be a reflection of an individual's aspirations or preferences concerning work statuses. A few studies compare aspirations and expectations to attainment which is defined as the behavioral realization of the goal.

Underlying much of the research is the implicit assumption that aspirations and expectations are in some way predictive of actual attainment in adult life and that there is a process which begins in childhood and might be subject to social intervention if we understood it better. Aspirations have been considered an essential component in the motivation to achieve, operating somewhat like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Much of the early research on aspirations or status projection and attainment was concentrated in the Midwestern states and involved primarily white, middle-class, high school students. Due to the nature of those populations, few blacks or lower SES youth were included. By using high school students, the most deprived youth were often excluded by virtue of the fact of their non-attendance at school. Furthermore, most of the studies focused largely or entirely on boys because of an assumption that careers and status attainment are more important for males or that the status of females is determined by that of their husbands [11]. More recent studies have included low-income youth, minority students and girls.

Most of the reported research has focused on a par-

ticular state or region, with few studies using national data. Because the studies used various instruments for measuring the variables examined and because rural cultures vary from state to state (and even within states) one should be cautious in generalizing the findings from one region to another. Because much of the research is somewhat dated, one must be particularly cautious when making comparisons. The societal changes which have occurred since the 1960s and the melding of cultures through travel, telecommunications and mass media also suggest that caution be utilized in interpretations.

One clear conclusion from the literature is that aspirations of youth are usually higher than their expectations. Those studies which examined these variables longitudinally have reported that, although expectations generally declined with age, aspirations remained high. Boyd et al. [5] examined a sample of low-income, southern rural young adults over the course of three time periods which approximated the three developmental stages suggested by Ginzberg [22]: fantasy, tentative and realism. Over time, occupational aspirations declined only slightly while occupational expectations declined dramatically for each time period. Their study raised the question of why the young adults in their sample continue to dream dreams that they never expect to fulfill. Kuvlesky's [32] work also produced evidence that aspirations do not become significantly more realistic as youth mature, at least within the limited time frame of the high school years, countering Ginzberg's theory. Coleman [11], whose subjects also encompassed Ginzberg's three stages (from preadolescence to late adolescence), reported substantial declines in educational aspirations and less substantial declines in occupational aspirations, supporting Ginzberg. Again, expectations declined more than aspirations. In a study of 614 young adults, Sollie and Lightsey [57] found that aspirations increased during the time period from 1966 (as tenth graders) to 1972 when they had achieved full-time employment status. Expectations during this time period decreased. Both aspirations and expectations were

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substantially higher than actual occupational attainment. In their study, race, sex and residence (small city, small town, rural farm or rural non-farm), when examined, failed to alter the nature of the relationship observed for the sample as a whole. Cosby [12] found that the rural youth in his study, when examined as adults, showed stability in occupational aspirations, a decline in occupational expectations, and an increase in educational aspirations. Educational attainment in early adulthood was reportedly influenced by career preference developed during their high school years.

Dunkleberger [18] found a different pattern in his longitudinal study, which compared youth in their tenth grade year to their early 20s. His data, obtained from 1,000 young adults raised in rural areas of six Southern states, showed a decline in aspirations over this time period. Educational goals were affected more than occupational goals, perhaps, in his opinion, because educational goals are the first to come in contact with the limitations of personal ability, financial resources and opportunities that are encountered in adult life. Boyd [6] suggested that changes in occupational aspirations, in values associated with occupational choice and in perceptions of goal blockage associated with occupational choice, that he found, reflected changes occurring in the larger society during the period under study. Employment opportunities had decreased toward the end of the period with the beginning of the recession of the early 1970s. Women had greater freedom in choice of occupations and legislation resulted in increased participation of blacks in many occupations. These and other changes in the larger society are mirrored in the changes observed between Boyd's youth in 1967 and 1972.

In a seven-year restudy of 431 males, Haller [23] concluded that the levels of occupational attainment in adult life are substantially influenced by levels of occupational aspirations in youth. Kuvlesky and Bealer [34], on the other hand, stated that their study did not provide strong support for the hypothesis that occupational aspirations are a good predictor of occupational attainment. They reported data from a sample of 1,001 high school sophomore males interviewed in 1947 regarding their occupational aspirations and again in 1957 regarding their occupational attainment. Work by Ramsay [48] and Coleman [11] has suggested that structural factors such as family background and socioeconomic status are more of an influence on attainment than are aspirations. Yoesting et al. [61] examined a sample of 143 males and females from eight rural high schools in Iowa who were surveyed as seniors in 1948, again in 1956 and again in 1967. Their data suggest significant relationships between occupational aspirations of the youths and their mothers' educational aspirations and attainment. No significant relationships were found between occupational aspirations of the youths and their residential background, socioeconomic background, father's education, father's 1948 occupation or the frequency of discussion of future plans with parents. Significant relationships were found between the occupations attained by the young adults and their socio-

economic background, occupational aspirations, educational aspirations and attainment, father's and mother's education and their own migration. Compared to females, a greater proportion of males attained the occupation they had aspired to as seniors in high school. However, a greater proportion of females attained additional education beyond high school. Educational aspirations for males and females were the same as high school seniors. Youth with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to aspire to and attain postsecondary education, as were those whose parents had higher educational attainments. A study by Dunkelberger and Sink [19] examined patterns of attainment for different categories of young adults. Although some relatively small differences appeared by sex, race and socioeconomic status, their data showed that the basic patterns of attainment were similar. Their study also showed that educational aspirations remained high even when educational attainment was low.

In a three-wave longitudinal study of white, non-metropolitan male youth in Alabama, Georgia and Texas in 1966, 1968 and 1972, Thomas et al. [59] reported that the major direct influences on educational attainment were level of educational and occupational aspirations. Cosby et al. [13], examined the relationship between adult attitudes and adult attainment. Because research had reported that adolescent aspirations have a substantial effect upon later attainment and yet these same aspirations are often much higher than actual attainment, Cosby sought to determine what happened to these aspirations in the adult period in light of realized lower attainment. It was found that educational and occupational aspirations remained high in adults, despite low status attainment levels.

Studies in the 1950s and early 1960s tended to show lower aspirations of youth in economically deprived and minority groups, but more recent studies have often shown all groups to have similarly high aspiration levels. Racial differences in the educational aspirations of rural youth were examined by Kuvlesky and Ohlendorf [36]. In a study of selected low-income counties in Texas, black boys and girls had higher educational aspirations and expectations than white boys and girls. Studies by Bales [2], Coleman et al. [10] and DeBord et al. [16] showed the educational aspirations of blacks to be higher than whites. Lyson and Stover [37] studied a sample of South Carolina youth as sophomores in 1967 and as seniors in 1969. As sophomores, more black boys expected to obtain a college degree than white boys, white girls or black girls. As seniors, white boys surpassed the other three groups in expectations. Thomas and Cosby [58] reported that in their study of 6,000 deep South high school students, blacks had lower occupational aspirations and expectations and equivalent educational aspirations and expectations. Aspirations were higher than expectations and both exceeded attainment for all groups. Both black and white students were optimistic about their future relative to their present life situation, but blacks were more likely to perceive factors hindering the attainment of their

goals. Cosby [12] did not find any significant differences among races. All groups endorsed traditional success themes of higher education and occupational attainment. Chu and Culbertson [8] studied the effect of socioeconomic factors on a sample of 73 youth from three isolated rural Alaska towns. Significant differences in educational expectations were found between the white and Alaska native youth, with the whites having higher educational expectations. Despite the differences in expectations, the native youths' educational aspirations were comparable to whites, supporting Merton's [40] contention that educational goals tend to be universal and cut across cultural differences.

In Cosby's [12] study, sex was a substantially more important social origin variable in the context of occupational preference than either race or socioeconomic status. Girls perceived their occupational choices to be much more restricted, but the selection of housewife was more likely to be expressed as an expectation than an aspiration. Although early marital plans were found to depress the educational attainment levels of both males and females, the negative effects were considerably greater for women. Coleman [11] also found the major differences between boys and girls to be that girls tend to name only a few occupations while boys varied much more widely in their occupational aspirations. Lyson and Stover [37] found that as sophomores in 1967, black girls had higher educational aspirations than white girls and boys, but lower than black boys. By 1969, both black and white boys surpassed black and white girls in expectations. In 1979, the percentage of those completing a college degree was highest for white boys, then white girls, black boys and black girls respectively. Chu and Culbertson [8] did not find significant sex differences in their Alaskan sample. In their study of sex differences in the educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth, Dunne et al. [20] examined a sample of 1,787 tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders in 26 rural high schools in five regions: Northern New England, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oregon, and Tennessee. The young women in their sample showed significantly higher educational aspirations, the same or higher occupational aspirations and equal ranges of job choices. Their study questions the applicability of male-based status attainment theories and the validity of instruments used in previous studies when considering aspirations of female youth.

Size of community or residence has been considered to be a variable related to educational and occupational aspirations in many studies and, once again, there are conflicting findings. Studies in the 1950s and 1960s generally reported that rural youth had lower aspirations than others and this was seen as a major factor in low attainment. According to Coleman [11], however, studies in the late 1960s and 1970s showed rather small differences, or none at all, between the stated aspirations of rural and other youth, especially during the high school years. Data obtained by Sewall [52], in a Wisconsin research project, supported the earlier studies that educational planning and aspirations of rural youth are generally lower than

those of urban youth. Studies by Slocum [56], Middleton and Grigg [41], Cowhig et al. [15], Schwarzweller [50], Burchinal [7] and Ramsay [49] had shown this to be the case. In a study by Harris et al. [26], in Australia, aspirations of country adults were lower than those of their urban counterparts. As inhabitants in isolated communities experienced better education, improved communication and greater mobility, their aspirations were raised not only for themselves and their children, but also for the whole community in which they lived.

In a study of rural-urban differences in educational aspirations of 6,000 Minnesota youth, Nelson [43] found that rural students register academic aptitude scores similar to those of urban students and they are as strongly encouraged to attend college as urban students. Rural students are as likely to enjoy school as urban students and they do not reject college attendance because of the scarcity of family financial support. What emerges from his study is the importance of social class in understanding community effects. Class differences in rural and urban areas are pronounced in Minnesota. When social class as a variable is controlled, rural-urban differences are reduced. However, the rural community structure appears to depress college aspirations below the level of comparable students from more urbanized areas. Data from a sample of 52,639 Minnesota high school juniors indicated to Nelson [44] that although attendance at small rural schools appears to lower values on one variable (rural-urban residence) related to aspirations, it simultaneously increased values on a second related variable (participation in extra-curricular activities). He suggested that reporting simple community size differences in determining aspirations obscures complex and confounding variables effecting the formation of aspirations.

Cosby [14], however, found that the rural youth he studied had high educational and occupational aspirations, countering the contention that lower achievement among rural youth results from lack of aspiration or ambition. Rural youth, even the more disadvantaged, participate psychologically in the "American Success Dream" if not in terms of actual behavior or attainment, according to Cosby. His results concurred with those of Slocum [56] who studied 30 rural high schools in the State of Washington during the 1964-65 school year and found that 75% of the boys and 65% of the girls expected to go to college, indicating that in at least one section of the country, rural youth had high educational expectations. Coleman [11] found very little rural-urban difference and very high occupational and educational aspirations among all the children in his sample in 1969. However, by 1975, his sample showed some tendency for rural children to have lower aspirations, as compared to both urban children in that year and rural children six years earlier. Race and sex differences, however, were still greater than residence differences. O'Neil [46] examined postsecondary aspirations of 720 high school seniors from five different residential settings (rural farm, rural non-farm, village, small-town and large city) in Ontario, Canada. His results indicated that the differences between

groups are minimal as residential locale accounted for only a small proportion of the variance in aspirational levels. As a group, in fact, rural non-farm students had the highest overall level of postsecondary aspirations, followed by small-town and city students, then rural farm and village students. Chu and Culbertson [8] found that the socioeconomic status of the community made a difference in educational expectations, with lower status community residents having lower expectations. No differences were found in the different communities, however, in the level of educational aspirations.

Cobb et al. [9] reported that there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that rural youth have lower levels of academic and vocational aspirations than do their cohorts in suburban and urban areas. Their 1985 analysis of data from 10,416 high school seniors from rural, suburban and urban areas, matched for socioeconomic variables, showed that rural high school seniors in the United States have lower educational aspirations than their counterparts in suburban and urban areas and, when they do aspire to postsecondary education, their expectations for the level of educational attainment are lower. More rural students than urban students expected to enter the work force immediately following high school and rural students' aspirations for specific careers or professions were generally at lower levels. In terms of the impact that the expectations of teachers, counselors and parents have on the aspirations of youth, their data confirmed a relationship between expectations of significant others and the resulting aspirations. Rural parents, teachers and counselors evidently do not hold career and educational aspirations for youth that are as high as those held by suburban and urban adults.

The influence of significant others on the formation of aspirations has been the focus of many studies. Parents, peers, teachers and counselors have been noted as important to setting youths' aspirations and expectations in studies by Sewell and Shah [54], Bordua [4], Haller and Woelfel [25] and Mueller [42]. Although he did not consider teachers and counselors in his study, O'Neil [46] found that parents and peers significantly affected level of aspiration. Yang [60], in his study of a national sample of 1714 rural high school seniors in 1972, found that grades in high school, parents' influence and peers' influence were significantly related to college aspiration and actual college attendance. Teachers' or counselors' encouragement to obtain higher education affected rural youths' aspiration but not actual college attendance. Mother's expectation was the most powerful influence on rural youths' college decision and attendance. Family income and number of siblings did not relate to aspirations or attendance after controlling other characteristics. Coleman [11] reported that his data indicated that parents were the predominant influence on young children's aspirations, with others in this order: siblings, other relatives, other children, other adults, teachers and ministers.

Deosaran [17] reported that a review of the Canadian literature shows that both the level of postsecondary

educational aspiration and the level of expectation are related to the student's social class, with the latter more strongly related. In all groups, aspirations are higher than expectations. Not only do a smaller proportion of lower class students aspire to attend universities, an even smaller proportion actually do attend. Being both poor and female depressed the likelihood even further. Language, ethnicity, location of residence, ability, family size, birth order, information access, type of high school and program, personality traits and the role of significant others were all related to postsecondary educational aspirations. A study by Picou and Carter [47], which examined a sample of 1,241 white, male, high school seniors in Louisiana, found that peer modeling had the strongest influence on aspirations and that the impact of peers was greater for rural youth than urban youth. Parental influence was greater for urban than rural youth. Sewall [52] showed that occupational choice was related to socioeconomic status, academic attainments of parents, school and community attitudes and intelligence. These variables interacted to such an extent that no single one could, by itself, provide an adequate explanation for the formation of aspirations.

The conflicting data in the research described above clearly indicate the need for careful scrutiny of studies before making generalizations with regard to the antecedents of educational and occupational aspirations of youth. Additionally, the need for more current research is obvious. Moreover, the studies raise philosophical issues deserving of consideration. If the aspirations of all youth are high, should we be pleased that they are aiming so high, based on the assumption that high aspirations will create the strong motivation that will spur them on toward higher attainment? Or should we be concerned about the psychological blows that many will suffer when they encounter reality and find they cannot achieve their goals? It is unlikely that large numbers of young people can move up in status without others moving down. And though the desire to achieve may provide motivation and drive, it can result in frustration for those who don't make it [11]. If aspirations are higher than expectations and expectations are higher than attainment, should we be trying to raise aspirations, or expectations, or attainment, or all three? And what is the relationship of these three to opportunity? If opportunities are not there, should we raise hopes or should we, instead, concentrate on removing the structural impediments that exist for some groups and provide expanded educational and occupational opportunities? Or should we do both? Without aspirations, low attainment is almost guaranteed. If rural youth or other groups have lower aspirations, should they be doomed to lower attainment so that they don't displace others? Or should they be encouraged to raise their aspirations, expectations and hopefully, attainment?

Are we even using appropriate measures? In an era when blue collar workers who are being laid off are concerned because they might be forced into lower paying white collar jobs, we must carefully analyze and consider the instruments being used and the values inherent in

them. And, if parents' aspirations for their children are not the same as those of school personnel or society at large, who's to say who's right?

And finally, is status attainment the ultimate goal of youth or should it be the goal of the occupational choice process? Perhaps happiness, quality of life, lifestyle and satisfaction are more appropriate ultimate goals. If so, more research of these factors and the processes leading to success in these arenas is required. A satisfying life may be achieved in a variety of ways other than through educational and occupational attainment alone. Educational and occupational aspirations, expectations and attainment would then be examined as a means to the end.

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